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Hazardous chemical in shellfish, river and harbor sediment

High PCB level in New Bedford area

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New Bedford, Mass.

Federal environmental officials have discovered one of the highest concentrations in the United States of PCBs, chemical compounds considered a health hazard, in the Acushnet River at New Bedford. The high level of PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) was found in shellfish and bottom sediment taken from both the river and New Bedford Harbor, and federal officials say they expect to find high PCB content in other fish from the area.

Since shellfish in the area have already been banned for human consumption because of bacteria pollution, an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) spokesman says they pose no significant danger. But the PCB level in fish indicates that the chemical could show up elsewhere in the environment, notes Paul Keough of the EPA.

He said 500,000 pounds of PCBs have also been dumped in a New Bedford landfill and could possibly leach into nearby land and water.

The tasks facing the EPA and the Massachusetts Office of Environmental Affairs, who jointly announced last week a program to "identify how widespread the problem is," are first how to get the chemicals out of the river, harbor, and landfill, and then how to dispose of them.

Question of sludge

"We could dredge the harbor and the river," says Mr. Keough, "But then what would we do with the sludge? If you just burn it, the PCBs scatter into the air."

PCBs are used by electrical-component manufacturers as a lubricant because they hold a charge well and are fire-resistant. However, they have proven very difficult to break down. When dumped or burned as a waste chemical they do not biodegrade but attach themselves to particles of matter – in water, la[illegible], or air – and work their way into the food system.

They can be broken down, say experts, but only in specially built, expensive incinerators. The only one in Massachusetts is run by General Electric in Pittsfield.

Government scientists were alarmed in August when they found PCBs in "worrisome" amounts in 48 of 50 samples of mother's milk from 10 states. Half of their worry was because they were not sure how the PCBs got there.

GE fund agreements

More recently, General Electric agreed this month to give New York State $3 million toward cleaning the Hudson River of PCBs from GE plants on that stream. The company also agreed to set aside $1 million for research on ending the overall problem with PCBs.

Use of the chemical in the electronics industry has fallen off, with General Electric and Dow Chemical marketing a substitute, and the only manufacturer of PCBs, Monsanto, reportedly plans to stop producing them by the end of 1977.

Mr. Keough stresses that the two New Bedford companies, Aerovox Corporation and Cornell-Dublier Company, which manufacture capacitors, did not discharge the chemical compound illegally. The companies stopped dumping PCBs into the Acushnet River several years ago and have been using the landfill under a state permit. That permit was recently suspended, and the companies now store their waste chemicals, although both hope to get their dumping licenses back.

John S. McGlennon, EPA regional administrator for New England, says: "The three samples obtained by our staff indicated values of 21, 23, and 53 parts per million PCB [in the New Bedford area]. The food and Drug Administration has a tolerance level of five parts per million for PCB."

PCBs are being monitored all over the country, he says, and 53 parts per million is the highest concentration discovered in any shellfish sample.

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